

Connecticut's Kingmaker:  
Enlightened Machine Politics in the Era of John Bailey, Democratic Boss

Andrew Hotaling  
Senior Honors Thesis  
Drs. Connelly and John, Thesis Advisors  
May 30, 2006

The Rise and Reign of Boss John Bailey of Connecticut:  
Trust as the Coin of His Realm

Why does the contemporary American citizen, in the words of columnist E.J. Dionne, “hate politics”? Is it simply a discontent with the character of our country’s political leadership and the current state of political discourse in the United States, or does the dissatisfaction of the American citizen arise out of fundamental disagreement with our extra-constitutional, party-driven system of political organization? Are political parties part of the problem or part of the solution to this crisis of confidence? In the forty years since E.E. Schattschneider published *Party Government*, contemporary political scientists have grappled with these necessary and important questions, looking back at how the Framers viewed partisan factionalism while looking forward to the creation of more principled, less self-interested forms of political organization.

To be sure, American political parties have existed in one form or another since the beginning of the Republic; Schattschneider boldly argued that “the parties created democracy... modern democracy is a by-product of party competition.”<sup>1</sup> These founding parties, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, shaped the bounds and character of our politics by debating the essential character and structure of the American republic, marshaling the public to either support or reject the work of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Under Madison’s Federalist formulation, the political party exists as a necessary evil of the liberal democratic republic, an institution designed to channel the interests, passions and opinions of the people and direct them towards the improvement of the nation’s laws. Since the natural differences in the faculties of men have given rise

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<sup>1</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942, 4.

to differences in property, the political party, under Madison's system, serves primarily as a vehicle for ambitious, interest-driven politicians who seek a favorable legal structure for the pursuance of economic, social, and political prosperity. Orienting ambition against ambition through party competition, Madison's pluralistic party structure serves to prevent "men of factious tempers" from becoming demagogues, allowing personal interest to flourish in ideological competition between liberal and conservative groups.

<sup>2</sup>Within this context, the political party's function is to gain and preserve power through the election of its members to positions within republican government, a singular goal that is often disguised today by the high-minded "public interest" rhetoric of primarily self-interested politicians.

This rhetoric, grounded in the idea that parties can serve the needs and desires of the whole nation rather than just a faction of the whole, illustrates the American public's continued sympathy with the Anti-Federalist view of political parties, a position best articulated by the populist political theory of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, a leader in the Progressive movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed that political parties could and should be representative of America's political diversity, fashioning their agendas from the aggregate opinion of the many rather than from the powerful interests of the few. In their zeal to use government for the promotion of the "public good," Wilson and his Anti-Federalist allies pushed forward reforms that institutionalized and regulated party administration, transferring significant power from backroom politicians to rank-and-file party voters. Principled and programmatic, an ideal Wilsonian party seeks to ameliorate

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Hamilton et al., *The Federalist: A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States*, New York: Modern Library, 2000, 59.

the democratic process by modeling government by consent within its own organization, refusing to marginalize opinions that might conflict with those of the party establishment.

Taken in the context of Connecticut politics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the enduring party management debate between Madison and Wilson molded and manipulated the emerging character of the Connecticut Democratic Party, an institution directed to power after the New Deal by state chairman and modern political boss John Moran Bailey. In the view of “Boss” Bailey, an ideological pragmatist and sincere partisan, political parties could readily empower the *vox populi* through the channeling of interest, passions and ideas into state government through party structures. A seasoned veteran of ward politics schooled by T.J. Spellacy and other titans of the 1930’s Hartford Democratic establishment, Bailey accepted parties as a necessary evil of republican rule and brutal partisanship as a necessary tool of the politician’s trade. Rallying against the New England reformist impulse within and without his own party, Chairman Bailey argued that “good government” and partisan politics were not mutually exclusive but could combine for the benefit of all of Connecticut’s citizens, especially for the benefit growing urban ethnic groups who had been ignored and marginalized for over a century by Republican legislators and governors.

Described by his biographer, Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, as “a mysterious figure of merciless, manipulative genius,” John Bailey reigned as the compleat power broker of Connecticut government for nearly half a century, a position that “Boss” Bailey exploited to create one of the most efficient, disciplined, and

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...Lieberman, The Power Broker: A Biography of John M. Bailey, Modern  
...New, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966, 2.

electorally successful political machines in the history of New England.<sup>3</sup> Equipped to provide continual sources of patronage for its supporters but also to empower and mobilize formerly marginalized constituencies, Bailey's political machine bridged the gap between the graft-oriented, largely undemocratic machines of America's past and the increasingly accountable and principled party organizations of America's future. Enlightened in its practical, real-world understanding of the James Madison's pluralistic party system and willingness to provide Connecticut Democrats with responsible, republican, and reform-minded leadership, Bailey's machine produced a steady string of victories for Connecticut Democrats throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a record that the Boss used in the 1960 Kennedy campaign to elevate himself into national politics as the chair of the Democratic National Committee. Yet even as Boss Bailey pursued his own ambition on a national stage, the party structure he built to sustain Democratic hegemony in Connecticut cultivated votes with merciless efficiency, a record that was only interrupted by liberal unrest over Bailey's support of President Johnson and the Vietnam War in the late 1960's. Soon called back to bridge the divide between liberals and conservatives within the Democratic coalition, Bailey taught Connecticut politicians the political utility of compromise, a tool that the Boss used to gain and sustain public support for Democratic government.

Focusing his efforts at all times on building and supporting a Madisonian, coalitional, pluralistic party at the state and national levels, Boss Bailey taught Democrats how to win by sharing his deep knowledge of ideological and ethnic constituencies, knowledge taken from on-the-ground politicking. While many of today's power brokers

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Lieberman, *The Power Broker: A Biography of John M. Bailey, Modern Political Boss*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966, 2.

stake their reputations on polling data and computer models of voting trends, John Bailey took pride in pulling the party levers through personal association and familiarity with regional leaders, men and women who held influence over the political conscience of local voters. Sustained by his family fortune, Bailey made the state party chairmanship a full-time, institutionalized position, consistent with his belief that Connecticut politicians needed a full-time support staff to broaden the party's popularity and their own public support. The consummate backroom power-player, equipped with a highly attuned sense of "political feel", Bailey reshaped Connecticut politics by adapting the structure of party management to his advantage, creating a boss-centered system grounded in the personal relationships that Bailey shared with Connecticut politicians.

Indeed, to understand John Bailey's rise and reign over Democratic politics at the state and national level, one must comprehend the foundational principle that governed his political relationships throughout his career: trust. As Madison claimed that "government is but a reflection on human nature," Bailey recognized that trust is a foundational part of stable human relationships, and thus government cannot work without a basic modicum of trust between political allies and their opponents.<sup>4</sup> Though Bailey came from a wealthy, well-educated background, he did not gain power in Connecticut politics by buying trust; he built it every day of his political career, from his earliest days as a ward heeler in Hartford through his final campaign for Ella Grasso in 1974. Cultivating this confidence within his own party as well as within Connecticut's Republican leadership, Boss Bailey understood that "there is... no coercive authority

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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton et al., 331.

inside or outside the world of politicians which can insure adherence to agreements made among them. One man's promise to another must do if the system is to function."<sup>5</sup>

Given that the very mention of political bossism conjures up images of William Marcy Tweed and the party ring of Tammany Hall in the mind of the contemporary American voter, Bailey's emphasis on building trust within and without his party sets him distinctly apart from the gross corruption practiced by innumerable urban machine leaders in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though this openness may well be a product of the post-Progressive Movement political environment in which Bailey operated, it is clear that Boss Bailey served as an honest broker for his party's interests and that his straightforwardness in political dealings lent a sense of consistency to the fluid arena of Connecticut politics. As Lieberman makes plain, "in the Connecticut Democracy, the system does function because all who participate know that John Bailey may hesitate or speak around a question or a request for support if he is not ready to answer that question or give that support, but when he puts forth his word he can be trusted absolutely."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as former CT Governor Chester Bowles put forward, this approach is also rooted in common-sense political savvy, for "once a politician earns a reputation as a double-crosser, his effectiveness rapidly disappears."<sup>7</sup>

Observed from the perspective of today's professional politicians, the rise and reign of John M. Bailey indicates the relevance of Madison's political theory to the practice of building and sustaining political power through strong parties. Naturally ambitious and naturally fallible, Madison's politician is pragmatic and unambiguously

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<sup>5</sup> Lieberman, 340-341.

<sup>6</sup> Lieberman, 340-341.

<sup>7</sup> Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941-1969*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, 220.

partisan, ready to move the levers of party in order to maximize his self-interest, whether or not that self-interest is consistent with the “public interest” articulated by his Wilsonian critics. Taking a page from Madison’s study of factionalism in *The Federalist* #10, Boss Bailey recognized that the “public interest” was best advanced by the constant competition of his party’s ideas and interests with those of the Republican Party and of independent politicians. Operating within the context of republican government, this clash of principles and politics in Connecticut ameliorated the state’s democratic process by encouraging substantive public debate on issues of local and national concern, persuading ambitious citizens to involve themselves in the political process. Therefore, considering the practical theory behind Bailey’s enlightened political machine, the student of Madison may comprehend five distinct lessons for professional politicians who seek to mold the institutional structure of strong parties to their partisan purposes.

First, political machines are an inevitable and indispensable force in America politics and a boon to republican government and a democratic people if properly managed. Second, a strong party platform means little without effective, politically savvy candidates who can turn ideas into policy and provide stable, energetic leadership in government. Third, effective management of a party agenda for legislative action demands careful moderation of special interests and exceptional knowledge of government frameworks and power structures. Fourth, electoral success for political parties in republican government requires a strong commitment to recognizing and organizing minority voter constituencies. Fifth, political pragmatism and the willingness to compromise are not only virtuous, but are wholly expedient for the long-term purposes of party politics in government.



“I Can Make The Mare Go”:  
Party Government and the Permanence of Machine Politics in America

Demonstrating his hunger for political victory and sincere love for the game of politics, John Bailey led Connecticut Democrats to electoral and legislative success by adjusting partisans within and without the party to his political will, creating a tight political machine with one essential purpose: to win popular support for the Democratic Party. Bailey’s machine, occupying what E.E. Schattschneider labeled “the best strategic position in American politics,” drew its power from the diverse local interests and passions of citizens from all corners of the state, citizens who recognized that they could advance their own ambition through cooperative political action with Boss Bailey.<sup>8</sup> Cultivating personal relationships with local leaders, Bailey and his subordinates fought to convince old-guard conservatives and Wilsonian reformers alike that politicians have “common interests as well as special interests,” their most common interest being the maintenance of party power over government action. Choosing to unite with Bailey on Election Day, members of these disparate political groups sought a stake in such power, subordinating their short-term political mobility for an opportunity to shape the form and character of state legislation.<sup>9</sup>

Though accused of gaining and maintaining power by corrupt, autocratic means, the Bailey machine secured substantive victories for Connecticut Democrats by acting upon the political theory of one of America’s greatest republicans: James Madison. Detailing the struggle that America faces in controlling “the violence of faction” in *The Federalist* #10, Madison indicated that factions are permanent fixtures of republican

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<sup>8</sup> Schattschneider, 150.

<sup>9</sup> James Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979, 128.

government, a direct consequence of “the diversity in the faculties of men, from which the rights of property originate.”<sup>10</sup> Concerned that these groups, constituting either a minority or majority of the American people, might embrace “schemes of oppression” and attempt to overthrow the government, Madison contended that the extent and proper structure of the new Constitution, specifically the unique federal character of the large republic, would control the effects of such factions on the whole nation.<sup>11</sup> Arguably much less wary of those parties and “factious leaders that may kindle a flame within their particular states, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other states,” Madison saw the virtue in allowing pluralistic competition of ideas and interests to flourish within and between states.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in orienting ambition against ambition on the national, state and local level, Madison paved the way for party bosses like John Bailey to reach out and solidify their influence on limited constituencies, influence that Bailey gained by appealing to the “local prejudices” of Connecticut’s citizens.

In creating an open framework for Boss Bailey to pursue his political ambition in Connecticut, James Madison’s theory also defined the bounds of party administration in America, restricting the scope of national party authority to the advantage of state and local party leaders. Turning America away from Britain’s political structure, a regime in which the Prime Minister and his majority party are the government, Madison supported a separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions within the federal Constitution, a separation of powers that empowered national parties to lead but not rule the country. Confident that “a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom

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<sup>10</sup> Hamilton et al., 55

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton et al., 60-61.

<sup>12</sup> Hamilton et al., 61.

take place upon any other principles than those of justice and the general good” under this unique system, Madison wanted the American regime to remain stable during dramatic shifts of public opinion, shifts that were bound to impact parties and their representatives in the federal government.<sup>13</sup> To adopt Tocqueville’s framework, James Madison and his Federalist colleagues feared the self-interested revision of America’s Constitution by “great” parties who might twist the laws to the protection of their rights over the rights of the whole citizenry.<sup>14</sup> Having resolved themselves to the proper form of republican government in the summer of 1787, the Founders were reluctant to allow these parties to undo the Convention’s work and change the structure of government without the overwhelming consent of the people, consent to be obtained through the constitutional amendment process. Cognizant of the political disharmony brought by the debate between Federalists and the Anti-Federalists during the ratification debates, Madison himself was fearful of the harm that a Second Convention might inflict on America’s fledgling republic, possibly undermining the very structures created to protect liberty and support citizens’ participation in political parties.

Denying national parties the means by which to control and alter American government to their liking, James Madison conversely supported the expansion and empowerment of state parties within their spheres of operation, secure in his conviction that these “small” parties could hardly achieve enough popular support to threaten the administration of the federal government. As the latter were bound to the local, provincial issues that constitute day-to-day politics outside of the nation’s capital, Madison’s theory

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<sup>13</sup> Hamilton et al. 335.

<sup>14</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1969, 174-175.

implied that the cooperative or non-cooperative action of state parties would contribute to the growth of America's pluralistic character. Under the Founder's decentralized party system, state parties would therefore act as accessible, easily reformable vehicles for distinct provincial interests and passions, able to articulate a substantive political message while remaining responsive to the ideas and interests of their constituent members. In addition, by contrasting the "national interest" with local interests, state parties would also serve as an extra-constitutional check on the prerogatives of the federal government.

Brought into effective use in Connecticut by the Bailey-led Democratic Party, James Madison's theses concerning parties in government provided John Bailey with a framework in which to advance his personal ambition and channel the aspirations of both professional politicians and average partisan voters in the state. Whether or not Bailey considered Madison's writings on this subject is irrelevant; Bailey encountered the structure of Madisonian theory on parties every time he attended a caucus meeting or state nominating convention, every time the State Central Committee interacted with the Democratic National Committee, and every time Connecticut Democrats considered lending their support to candidates for president. Indeed, instead of reading Madison's texts, Bailey lived them. Cognizant that the structure of American government provided significant freedom of action, and consequently, significant power, to parties of localized interest, John Bailey set out to gain control of the Connecticut Democratic Party by the most efficient means possible: the political machine.

Centered in the heavily ethnic, heavily Democratic wards of Connecticut's capital city, Boss Bailey's political organization was born out of his rough and tumble experience as Hartford boss T.J. Spellacy's "errand boy" in the early 1930's, a position

Bailey used to cultivate contacts within Hartford's Old Guard political elite. An up-and-coming representative on the Democratic State Central Committee during his early days, Bailey zealously performed his mentor's bidding in exchange for the chance to view Spellacy at work in his natural habitat: the wards of Hartford. Soon known to professional politicians across the state, Bailey used his position to gain practical, first-hand knowledge of party constituencies, interest groups, and ideological divides within the Democratic coalition, knowledge that served him well later in gauging the state's receptiveness to Democratic candidates and policy proposals. Sensing the waning strength of Spellacy and in the late 1930's, Bailey made his first moves to distance himself from the Old Guard, cautious steps that culminated in his decision to run for Hartford probate judge in 1940.<sup>15</sup>

Though Boss Bailey, having been lambasted as a "political hack" by his opponent, ultimately lost that election, his star rose quickly in inner Democratic power circles, enabling Bailey to overthrow Spellacy and gain control of Hartford's political convention in early 1946. However, this victory, achieved as it was from over a decade of personal attention to Hartford's wards, represented only a middling step towards Boss Bailey's ultimate goal: control of the state nominating convention, and thus, control of the Connecticut Democratic Party. Drawing on all the contacts made throughout his career to position himself for a run at the state party chairmanship, Bailey spent his political capital in supporting the candidate that he believed would win the nomination for Governor: Wilbur Snow. Assuming the chairmanship after Snow's victory at the

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<sup>15</sup> Lieberman, 68-80.

Bushnell in 1946, Boss Bailey took the reins of a party badly in need of dedicated leaders and strong issues, challenges suited to the talents of Connecticut's new "power broker."<sup>16</sup>

Executing his political dealings over the next thirty years with the same hard-bargaining style that Madison exemplified as a legislator in the early Congress, John Bailey made plain efforts to centralize the party's essential functions in the hands of the State Central Committee, an entity that he controlled and could count upon to execute his political will. In possession of the Committee's chairmanship as well as the votes to control most, if not all of the nominations at the state convention, Bailey's machine became, in some sense, Connecticut's Democratic Party. Directly responsible for "the mobilization of majorities in recognition of the great public interests, integration of special interests with public policy, and the overall management, and planning involved in discriminating among special interests," Boss Bailey and his surrogates brought hierarchical, disciplined leadership to a party formerly crippled by internal ideological factionalism.<sup>17</sup> Transforming what was before mostly a "part-time thing" into a full-time political operation, Bailey made himself and his contacts useful to candidates running for local, statewide, or federal posts, providing political advice and party resources in return for a commitment to support the party's main policy initiatives. Although these offers of aid hardly ever constituted a firm quid pro quo, loyalty to the Bailey organization was rewarded by patronage positions and the possibility of nomination to higher office at the next state convention, political prizes that lured many independent Wilsonian Democrats and their supporters to toe the party line. As state Senator and political scientist Duane

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<sup>16</sup> Lieberman, 80-96.

<sup>17</sup> Schattschneider, 31.

Lockard readily admitted, “in the course of a five-month session and two special sessions, I never once heard a ‘demand’ from Bailey.”<sup>18</sup>

However, Boss Bailey, like “Albany Regency” boss Martin Van Buren before him, understood the political machine as a means, rather than an end in the cultivation of political power, thus avoiding the pitfalls of corruption that bound themselves to machine politics in New York’s Tammany Hall under Boss Tweed. In any case, as Lieberman astutely observes in *The Power Broker*, Bailey’s machine would have found it difficult to emulate Tweed’s methods even if Boss Bailey embraced such corruption, given that the latter operated in a wholly different social, political and legal context than that of New York City in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the author remarks, “gone are the immigrant masses the Boss fed, employed, and acculturated for the very reasonable price of a vote. Gone is the legal laxity that allowed fraud to enter when popular strength failed to ensure the Boss’s victory. Gone is the public naïveté which enabled the Boss to frolic unnoticed through the public till.”<sup>19</sup> Though denied these avenues to use or abuse political power, Boss Bailey was not any less effective than his less-honorable predecessors, employing the tools of political patronage and his personal connections to secure the Democrats legitimate legislative and electoral victories. Moreover, having been educated as an attorney at Harvard Law School, Bailey possessed deep reverence for the law, a respect for the stability of American political institutions that set bounds upon his political actions. Once accused of corruption in a 1963 General Assembly investigation of the

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<sup>18</sup> Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959, 347.

<sup>19</sup> Lieberman, 338.

state insurance patronage system, Bailey testified and complied fully with all subpoena requests, even offering to resign his position to limit political damage to the Democrats.<sup>20</sup>

Though its many critics would cringe at the thought that the political machine could ever exist as a mainstay of our nation's politics, the rise and reign of Boss Bailey's enlightened machine in the context of Madison's decentralized party system demonstrates that strong state party organizations can be successful in the modern era. Though this influence has waned strongly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, political machines continue to exert great influence over the voting behavior of urban Americans.<sup>21</sup> As Representative Steve Fontana, the current Vice Chair of the Connecticut Democrats argues, "machines are tools, neither good nor bad in and of themselves...on the positive side, they can advance a coherent agenda that improves the lives of everyday citizens."<sup>22</sup> Centered around Bailey's dynamic leadership and not the promise of corrupt financial or political gain, the Bailey machine sought rewards for itself by working to expand and solidify the Democratic power base in Connecticut, a goal that both liberal and conservative party members could agree upon. As Lieberman argues, "there has emerged among Connecticut Democrats a feeling – sometimes gratitude, sometimes awe, sometimes empathy – that John Bailey's first wish is the good of the party."<sup>23</sup> Appealing to their common interest instead of to the political ideology of either wing of the party, John Bailey strategically moderated the Democrats' essential message, stressing the inclusive nature of the whole party over the exclusive nature of its inner power circle. In Bailey's

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<sup>20</sup> Lieberman, 304-309.

<sup>21</sup> E-mail interview with Lt. Governor Kevin Sullivan, 03 Mar. 2006.

<sup>22</sup> E-mail interview with Rep. Steve Fontana, 03 Mar. 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Lieberman, 343.



view, winning popular support for Connecticut Democrats was the purpose of his organization and to that end, "I can make the mare go."<sup>24</sup>

Finding the Right Horse:  
Chairman Bailey's Candidate-Centered Election Strategy

Probed and dissected in great detail by political scientists from James Madison to Alexis de Tocqueville, from E.E. Schattschneider to Robert Dahl, the American political party exists for and survives by its dedication to a singular task: the election of its members to positions within federal, state, and local government. Pursuant to this end, parties distinguish themselves from all other forms of political association by their nomination of candidates to fill such positions. In theory, these candidates are rabidly loyal partisans who presumably reflect the ideological disposition and interests of the local party base. Though fraught with the potential for significant internal political discord, the nomination process nevertheless is crucial to the maintenance of party power within the structures of republican government. As Schattschneider declares in *Party Government*, "a party must make nominations if it is to be regarded as a party at all."<sup>25</sup> Through its attention to fielding candidates who resonated with Connecticut voters and shepherding them through the nomination process, the enlightened Bailey machine constructed and sustained a governing majority for Connecticut Democrats in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, drawing ambitious candidates out of the political woodwork and into the State Capitol.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert P. Warren, *All the King's Men*, New York: Hartcourt, Inc., vi.

<sup>25</sup> Schattschneider, 100.

Cognizant of the substantial authority that Bailey and his fellow power brokers wield in the nomination process, political scientists in the responsible party government school single out nominations as the function most indicative of a party's inner power structure, such that "he who has the power to make the nomination owns the party."<sup>26</sup> As Schattschneider and his colleagues propose, the local political boss positions himself to act as the "locus of power" in candidate selection, possessing the statewide contacts and political capital to make or break the candidacies of small-time, inexperienced politicians. Indeed, candidates who obtain the support of the party establishment have a marked advantage over outlying "independent" politicians, most of whom lack the resources and popular support to make a frontal attack on entrenched party leaders.

Marching against the grain, the former also have little success in appealing to national party workers for assistance, the majority of who have neither the means nor the inclination to challenge well-established power brokers for control of state party nominations. Addressed in the previous section, this reluctance to exert top-down national authority is a function of the federalized, separated character of American government. Accordingly, as Charles O. Jones asserts, "parties will, themselves, be separated and federalized. Just as there is no central, all-powerful governing unit, there will not be a single, unifying party structure."<sup>27</sup> Thus empowered by Madison's argument concerning the extent and proper structure of the Union, the boss possesses, at least in

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<sup>26</sup> Schattschneider, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Charles O. Jones, "Presidential Leadership in a Government of Parties: An Unrealized Perspective." In Green, J. & Herrnson, P (eds.), *Responsible Partisanship: The Evolution of American Political Parties since 1950*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002, 147.

theory, the ability to singularly direct local party affairs, dominance that begins with the selection of loyal, politically savvy nominees.

However, as a consequence of the Progressive and Neo-Progressive party reform movements of the past century, the political boss's prerogative has been sharply limited in favor of more "democratic" methods of nominee selection, most notably the party primary. Railing against the king-making power of party bosses in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, pre-Wilsonian reformists advanced these methods as a means of applying the republican principle to local party administration, taking the nominating power away from the few and giving it to the many. Spurred on by evidence of public corruption by Tweed and his contemporaries, Progressive leaders did not discriminate, as Tammany leader George Washington Plunkitt did, between "honest graft" and "dishonest graft", aiming to eliminate graft altogether and end the nomination of puppet politicians.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, as the "muckraking" journalist Lincoln Steffens observed in *The Shame of the Cities*, the nomination and election of grafting politicians had serious consequences for the principle of self-government, for "the effect of it is literally to change the form of our government from one that is representative of the people to an oligarchy, representative of special interests."<sup>29</sup> Echoing the Anti-Federalist critique of Madisonian pluralism, Steffens and his Progressive contemporaries argued that special interests are naturally given to embrace "schemes of oppression" instead of a proper regard for the public interest. As solution, Steffens and his Progressive contemporaries made the case

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<sup>28</sup> William Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, New York: Signet Classics, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, 17.

that primaries would enable the people to take back parties from professional politicians through the principle of “one man, one vote” on nominations.

Painting the boss, often appropriately so, as the ringleader of a cabal to deceive and defraud the American voter, these reformers demonized the very notion of organization politics, political methods that they themselves practiced in order to alert and mobilize the public against the evils of machines. Sounding the call for “nonpartisan” rule, Steffens himself contended that “if we would leave parties to the politicians, and would not vote for the party, not even for the men, but for the city, and the State, and the nation, we should rule parties, cities, and States, and Nation.”<sup>30</sup> When combined with Americans’ natural distrust of authoritarian rule, Progressive rhetoric against boss-dominated party organizations shaped American political discourse in a deep and lasting way, shaping further reform movements and the call by political scientists in the 1950’s for more responsible, programmatic parties. Judging from the outcry in recent months against corrupt election bargains and legislative dealings in the current Congress, this oratory still exerts substantial power over U.S. voters, the majority of whom would like to believe that their elected representatives, and not unelected machine bosses, direct American politics.

In Connecticut, the “good government” impulse of liberal Republicans and Democrats to reform the state’s political nominating processes after the Progressive Era faced significant challenges from self-interested party leaders on both sides, none of whom wanted to abandon the advantages conferred by nominating candidates at state conventions. From J. Henry Roraback to T.J. Spellacy, from John Bailey to Bill Brennan,

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<sup>30</sup> Steffens, 6.

Connecticut's state and local bosses fought tooth and nail to hold their discretionary power over nominations, delaying the passage of a direct primary law until 1955, when Connecticut was the last state in the Union to adopt such legislation. Clearly, without a primary system to bring the nomination process into the hands of rank and file party voters, ambitious Democratic candidates in Connecticut possessed but one avenue for political advancement: through Boss Bailey and his party establishment. As former state senator Duane Lockard suggests in *New England State Politics*, "in the absence of a primary the opportunity for political advancement lay within the organization, not through independent appeals to the electorate in a primary."<sup>31</sup>

Identifying the bill as a direct threat to his continued control of the party's conventions, Boss Bailey sought to "improve the legislation to death" by adding provisions that would make state representatives think twice about voting in favor, a strategy that killed the bill while putting Bailey's organization on the record in support of top-to-bottom primaries. Though this approach ultimately failed in a special session later that year, Bailey, with his highly attuned sense of "political feel", recognized that a reformist stance on primaries might earn the Democrats greater support from independent voters in the next election. Lending his approval to the final bill passed by the General Assembly and signed by Governor Ribicoff, Bailey appreciated that control of the state Democratic convention meant little if his party remained in minority status, a situation that forced Boss Bailey to engage in substantive compromises with liberal Republicans and Democrats on nominations.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lockard, 255.

<sup>32</sup> Lieberman, 186-187.

To this end, the Bailey machine used its substantial political capital to filter out candidates who lacked, in Boss Bailey's view, the most important quality of a politician: the ability to attract enough popular support to win a general election. While the Boss was confident that Democrats would not fade into electoral obscurity like the Federalists and the Whig Party in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the highly competitive nature of Connecticut electoral politics drove Bailey to endorse proven vote-getters, candidates who could thrive in an environment where the two political parties frequently won elections by only a few thousand votes. Given that independents constituted nearly one third of all registered Connecticut voters in the 1950's, both Republicans and Democrats had a vested interest in picking candidates who could appeal to the political center in a general election campaign. Arguing against party primaries for this very reason, Bailey reasoned that primary voters, consisting mostly of highly motivated, highly ideological partisans, would be much more likely to nominate a left-wing or right-wing candidate than one with a centrist ideology.<sup>33</sup> In Bailey's eyes, pandering to either extreme would imperil the party's chances to acquire a governing majority in the State Capitol and on Connecticut's congressional delegation.

Though he prized the loyalty of his closest political associates, Chairman John Bailey had no use for candidates who could not appeal beyond the Democratic Party's urban base to the sentiments of socially conservative, politically independent voters who populate Connecticut's small towns and hamlets. Cold and calculating in his assessment of nominees, Bailey was content to withhold his support until he found a politician to whom the Connecticut people did respond, even if that candidate did not fully support the

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<sup>33</sup> Lieberman, 186.

policy initiatives of the party base. To give a pertinent example of this pragmatism, the Bailey machine faced a barrage of rhetorical attacks in the late 1940's and early 1950's from Thomas Dodd, the former chief trial counsel at the Nuremberg tribunal and an ambitious liberal who decried the "authoritarian" rule that Boss Bailey had asserted over Connecticut Democrats. Unsuccessful in his 1948 campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, Dodd cultivated popular support during the next decade as a congressional representative, sentiment that he mobilized in his bid for a senatorial nomination in 1958. While Boss Bailey originally favored the candidacy of former governor Chester Bowles, Dodd's strong showing on the convention's first ballot demonstrated the depth of support that the congressman enjoyed within and without Hartford County, a mobilized constituency that would strongly support Dodd in the case of a party primary. Considering these important factors independent of his personal friendship with Bowles and personal dislike of Dodd, Boss Bailey favored Dodd for the nomination out of respect for the maverick representative's electoral skill, skill that the Democrats aimed to utilize in positioning other candidates for political victory. As Lieberman concludes, "Tom Dodd was a vote-getter, a winner...and to John Bailey this is what really counts."<sup>34</sup>

Noticeably unlike political bosses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in his readiness to sacrifice personal loyalties and ambition for the sake of his party's electoral success, John Bailey ensured that Connecticut Democrats nominated strong candidates by providing strong leadership for his organization on the convention floor. Like a field general marshalling his troops for battle, Boss Bailey was ever present at the Bushnell to provide

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<sup>34</sup> Lieberman, 209.

guidance and assurances to party leaders, to negotiate with candidates and their supporters, and to orchestrate the mobilization of huge blocks of delegates for or against specific candidacies. Glasses on the top of his bald head and a cigar in his mouth, Bailey ruled the convention from the purview of the smoke-filled Green Room, holding court as professional and amateur politicians on the floor predicted who would or would not gain his all-important support. In the view of Nancy DiNardo, Connecticut's current Democratic chairwoman, Bailey's presence at the convention was both intimidating and awe-inspiring.<sup>35</sup> He was, as Cabell Phillips described his kind, "the familiar image of the beefy, cigar-smoking, diamond-studded Irish Machiavellis who, as masters of large and inert blocks of voters, control the political destiny of the nation."<sup>36</sup> Though Bailey himself chose not to live his political life as Machiavelli's Prince would have, the Boss understood the utility of maintaining a "Boss Tweed"-like aura in his dealings with party officials. As Chairwoman DiNardo relates, "he was like Nelson Mandela. When he walked into a room, you knew he was there, and he made sure that you felt his presence."<sup>37</sup>

Accustomed to showing deference to Bailey, city bosses large and small brokered with the Boss on legislative and patronage matters, hoping to gain political capital of their own by supporting Bailey's candidates for nomination. Like any good poker player, Boss Bailey waited to show his hand on nominations until an opportune moment shortly before or during the convention, maximizing his political advantage by forcing the party's pluralistic interests and ideological factions to adjust to his selection under time

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Nancy DiNardo, 30 March 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Lieberman, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Nancy DiNardo, 30 March 2006.



constraints. Specifically, this strategy proved especially successful during the 1958 convention when Bailey held out his support for Dodd's U.S. Senate candidacy until the last moment, confusing and angering Bowles while securing Dodd's nomination.<sup>38</sup>

Brokering the power to shape Connecticut politics through strategic nominations, Boss Bailey reached the pinnacle of his nominating authority as a strategist for the Kennedy presidential campaign in 1960, a role that propelled him into the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee. In the eyes of many Connecticut politicians and party leaders, John Bailey's "political feel" for candidate selection proved to be at its zenith in support of the Kennedy candidacy, which he sponsored from its inception in early 1959 through its conclusion on Election Day, 1960. Risking his emerging national reputation on the political skill of a young, up-and-coming politician, Bailey made an initial evaluation of Kennedy's shot at the presidency and stood by it, demonstrating with zealous sincerity his commitment to never waver in defense of a nominee that he had publicly supported. Rewarded during the campaign for his loyalty and political talents, Bailey was appointed a special liaison to state and local political leaders throughout the country.<sup>39</sup>

Given his experience appealing to the "local prejudices" of Connecticut voters, Bailey felt at home dealing with the localism of political leaders from the rest of the country. With substantial experience as a member of Connecticut's DNC delegation since 1936, Boss Bailey used his skills as a convention floor general to secure Kennedy's nomination in Los Angeles, marshalling big city bosses in the Northeast and persuading

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<sup>38</sup> Bowles, 267.

<sup>39</sup> Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960*, New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1961, 65.

Democratic leaders in Pennsylvania and the Midwest to choose Kennedy over Johnson or Stevenson.<sup>40</sup> Campaigning tirelessly for Kennedy's election afterwards, Bailey stood firm as an enthusiastic, but pragmatic supporter of the Senator from Massachusetts. Did Bailey stick with John F. Kennedy because of his strong liberal views? No. Did he stick with Kennedy simply because of his Irish Catholic background? No. He stuck with Kennedy for one reason: Bailey believed that the Senator could win.

“Adjusting the Clashing Interests”:  
Boss Bailey’s Dominion Over Connecticut Legislative Politics

Using his personal authority to ensure the successful nomination and election of effective candidates throughout the 1950's, John Bailey moved Connecticut Democrats from minority to majority party status in state legislative politics, to a position of power in which Democrats were called not to only guide, but to govern state affairs. This responsibility, accompanied as it was by the advantages of patronage appointments and the trappings of higher office, invited the Bailey machine to take a more active, self-interested role in the formation of Democratic legislative policy. However, accustomed to playing the role of the “loyal opposition” in state government, Bailey's party lacked the strong legislative leadership needed to enact policies into law, a vacuum that Boss Bailey filled with his dynamic, ubiquitous presence in the halls and offices of the State Capitol.

Equipped with comprehensive, first hand knowledge of legislative rules and procedure, the willingness to negotiate with Republicans and Democrats alike, and the ability to enforce party line voting on maverick politicians, Bailey translated his party's electoral successes into substantive legislative victories. Managing the interests and ideas

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<sup>40</sup> Lieberman, 280.

of legislators and party factions to create a unified caucus, Boss Bailey shored up popular support for his own leadership and that of his organization, presenting the “Connecticut Democracy” as an eminently electable party. To Robert Dahl’s question of who governs, one might correctly answer that the active, responsible, and republican leadership of Boss John Bailey governed Connecticut politics during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup>

Vitality expanding the role of the state party chairman beyond electoral politics, Boss Bailey led the Connecticut General Assembly by first understanding the political workings of the institution and the ideological tendencies of its members, knowledge that he obtained as the legislature’s Statute Revision Commissioner in the early 1940’s. Appointed by Governor Hurley to this non-partisan position, Bailey developed close working relationships with Republican and Democratic leaders in the state legislature, all of whom relied upon Bailey to draft and proofread major pieces of legislation. Present to witness the strong debates early in the legislative year as well as the pitched battles to pass bills at the end of every session, John Bailey soon took on the coloring of his political environment, earning the respect of legislators and gaining a canny interest in public policy. While challenged by the scope of his assignment, Bailey used his position to obtain insight on the inner procedures of the lawmaking process, “coming to know the legislature, where it had been and how it moved.”<sup>42</sup> As former State Senator Duane Lockard relates in *New England State Politics*, the General Assembly at this time remained instinctively dependent on the partisan initiative of party leaders, such that “in Connecticut the party leadership is the real leadership of the legislature...only the naïve

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Lieberman, 68.

fail to recognize their importance.”<sup>43</sup> In the wake of J. Henry Roraback’s heavy-handed legislative rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Assembly’s deference to party officials persisted as a byproduct of increased electoral competition between Republicans and Democrats, an environment in which seasoned power brokers on both sides easily commanded the allegiance of their newly-elected protégés.<sup>44</sup>

Having lived through a similar relationship as T.J. Spellacy’s “errand boy” only a decade earlier, John Bailey understood the political loyalties that controlled Connecticut’s legislative process, a system oriented to deliver policy victories to the most effective, well-connected party organization. Leaving the position of Statute Revision Commissioner to take the reins of the Democratic state chairmanship in 1946, Bailey aimed to build an organization that could deliver such victories on a consistent basis, updating Roraback’s “old guard” methods for use in a more pluralistic, representative General Assembly. As a first step to this goal, Boss Bailey expressed strong support for the largely urban, liberal Democrats who constituted most of the party’s legislative caucus, quickly distancing himself from the failures of former Governor Cross’ party leaders during the New Deal. Unlike Cross’ Democratic chairmen, conservative businessmen politicians who had little contact and thus little legislative cooperation with the core liberal elements of the emerging state party, Bailey demonstrated his willingness to support policy proposals from all ideological corners, a pragmatism that the Boss held to throughout his political career. Similar to his practical approach to political nominations, Boss Bailey’s legislative strategy centered itself on supporting policies that

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<sup>43</sup> Lockard, 278.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Ehrenhalt, *The United States of Ambition: Politicians, Power, and the Pursuit of Office*, New York: Times Books, 1991, 147.

would earn popular support within and without the party base, earning Connecticut Democrats greater control of government during the next election. Enlightened by his own experience as the draftsman of failed and successful bills alike, Bailey came uniquely prepared to shape the actions of legislators and the future of legislation in the General Assembly, an arena of political combat the Boss deemed his own.<sup>45</sup>

Empowered by his direct knowledge of institutional procedure, John Bailey took full advantage of legislative deference to centralize party policy strategizing in his own organization, forcing state legislators to consult him before introducing bills on the floor of the House or Senate. These regular consultations, like Bailey's meetings with other power brokers, took place in the Boss' "office" in the hallway outside the legislative chamber, a location Bailey used to keep tabs on the progress of legislation. Like a general directing his troops in the field, Bailey commanded loyalty from his legislators, recognizing the importance of maintaining party cohesion in the face of an aggressively competitive Republican caucus. Hardened by their cooperation in the face of Republican majorities in the House and Senate in the late 1940's and under a Republican governorship until 1954, Bailey's state representatives and senators grew to rely upon each other as they all relied upon Bailey, staging significant political demonstrations like the procedural delay of Governor Lodge's inauguration in 1951. Assessing Bailey's motives in orchestrating disputes with the Republican leadership, Lieberman argues that "there was much to be gained by getting his Senators into the habit of voting together under pressure. What better way to inculcate group cohesion than by putting the group

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<sup>45</sup> Lieberman, 104.

into bitter combat with the enemy?"<sup>46</sup> Using group psychology to unite the Senate caucus, Bailey enforced straight party-line voting on every single roll-call vote during the 1951 legislative year, a record that political scientist Alan Ehrenhalt deems "a triumph for traditional leadership...the members practiced their profession as they had been taught to practice it. They did as they were told."<sup>47</sup> As high-handed and dictatorial as this system appears to modern-day Wilsonian reformers, Bailey understood that his party would never achieve political success without a legislative record to run upon, a record that could only be achieved by cohesive voting behavior among Democratic legislators.

With the election of Democratic Rep. Abe Ribicoff as Connecticut governor in 1954, Boss Bailey gladly relinquished his role as policy spokesman for state Democrats, viewing the Governor's office as the most effective mouthpiece for party unity in the legislature. Though Ribicoff was marginally more moderate than former Governor Chester Bowles, with whom Bailey had worked closely in the late 1940's, Bailey's ideological pragmatism saw political advantage in supporting any agenda put forward by a Democratic governor.<sup>48</sup> As Bailey reasoned, both Bowles and Ribicoff had proven their electability and popular appeal on a statewide basis, appealing effectively to the ideas and interests of Connecticut's citizens. If Connecticut's citizens favored the policies of Bowles or Ribicoff, Bailey knew that he had to favor the same, if only to capitalize on the groundswell of support for either candidate and grow the Democratic Party. However, while endorsing such limited majoritarianism as the proper basis for public policy ideas, the Bailey machine allowed the final and often most important details of legislation to be

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<sup>46</sup> Lieberman, 154.

<sup>47</sup> Ehrenhalt, 149.

<sup>48</sup> Lieberman, 347

determined by a small group of individuals, a group approximating what public policy scholars like C. Wright Mills and John Zaller call the "power elite".<sup>49</sup>

Led policy-wise by Democratic governors, the Bailey elite consisted of most the leading Democratic city bosses and party chieftains, all of whom had interested stakes in squeezing their pet projects into important pieces of legislation. However, in every case, Bailey's direction of this elite oriented Democratic public policy towards proposals that would increase the party's voting base during the next election, elevating Democrats as a whole instead of simply Democratic special interests. Therefore, in compensating power brokers for their loyalty and campaigning efforts, Bailey "rewarded each according to his contribution or potential for harm" to Democrats' electoral chances.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, in the end, Boss Bailey left the final determination on pending bills to the discretion of Democratic governors, politicians who, unlike Bailey, were ultimately held accountable to the public for the successes or failings of Democratic public policy.

Recognizing that Chester Bowles and his successors would bear the brunt of partisan Republican criticism during their time in the State Capitol, John Bailey used the public cover of the Governor's office to engage in serious legislative negotiations on the latter's behalf, ensuring that Democrats would remain loyal and Republicans would remain open to the governor's proposals. Bowles, a reform-minded Wilsonian Democrat whose liberal credentials made him initially hesitant to embrace Bailey's legislative leadership, quickly appreciated the Boss's willingness to compete and compromise with legislators inside and outside the Democratic party. Writing of Bailey and other

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<sup>49</sup> James Ceaser et al., "The Public Policy Process", In *American Government: Origins, Institutions and Public Policy*. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc, 2002, 465-469.

<sup>50</sup> Lieberman, 341.

“professional politicians” in his memoir, the former governor understood that the Boss “had an unsurpassed knowledge of the legislative process, worked hard at his trade, and personally read every bill that came out of committee... he quickly saw that I held strong views on what I wanted to do but worked loyally to develop legislative and public support.”<sup>51</sup> Having been handpicked by Bailey to run for governor in 1954, Ribicoff established a similar, if not more comfortable working relationship with the state chairman, relying upon Bailey for political advice on the legislative process and the dispositions of Democratic legislators.

Though Bailey often bore the brunt of Ribicoff’s frequent frustration with the inefficiency of a system of separated powers in Connecticut government, Lieberman relates that “their relationship was altogether amicable because they both were wise enough to appreciate how invaluable each was to the other.”<sup>52</sup> In Bailey’s opinion, the governor’s office was both the starting and ending point of all successful legislation; possession and effective use of this office conferred a strategic political advantage to the Governor’s party in legislative debate. Having witnessed the ineffective use of gubernatorial power during Governor Cross’s tenure, Bailey was certain not to repeat the mistakes of his predecessors in the state party leadership, using the Governor’s office as a “bully pulpit” for Ribicoff’s main policy initiatives.

The self-appointed “whip” of Democratic legislators in the Connecticut General Assembly, John Bailey made it his business to cultivate relationships built on trust with individual legislators, using his influence to advance their policy positions within the party while persuading them to support the governor’s agenda. Operating within a

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<sup>51</sup> Bowles, 218.

<sup>52</sup> Lieberman, 230.



thoroughly Madisonian, pluralistic institution, Bailey took it upon himself to moderate the policy dialogue within his caucus, “adjusting the clashing interests” among liberal and conservative legislators and conferring with the governor to achieve a unified Democratic front against the equally self-interested Republican leadership.<sup>53</sup> To give an example of contentious legislation, Governor Ribicoff’s initiatives to reform the state court system, abolish county government, and reapportion the state legislature after his landslide victory in 1958 all met significant resistance from conservative, small-town Yankee Democrats. Of this political minority within the Democratic Party, many legislators threatened to jeopardize the governor’s agenda by voting with Republicans on these and other contentious bills.<sup>54</sup> Bailey, who had accompanied Ribicoff on previous reform measures like the party primary system, viewed this resistance as a referendum on his own legislative management, management he had recently extended to the new Democratic majority in the state House.

Convening a “brain trust” led by Secretary of State Ella Grasso to plan an effective response to the threat of maverick Democrats, Boss Bailey developed a two-pronged strategy for legislative victory: isolate and placate wayward caucus members while undermining Republican cohesion through compromise proposals. Consistent with his belief that “the administration is always right” – in the case that it is Democratic – Bailey went down the line for the Governor’s proposals on both fronts, mollifying Democratic concerns by arranging personal visits for legislators with the governor and chipping away at Republican opposition through intense negotiations with the new and

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<sup>53</sup> Hamilton et. al, 57.

<sup>54</sup> Lieberman, 231.

inexperienced Republican party chairman Ed May.<sup>55</sup> In each of these tasks, the latter of which became a grudge match between the Boss and his green opponent, Bailey the master tactician embodied hard-hitting legislative leadership, rallying his caucus to fulfill their party's campaign promises and reform state government.

Surveying the political disposition of Connecticut voters, the Boss recognized that the Democratic base and outlying independent voters favored a reform-oriented legislature, a legislature willing to challenge the status quo on issues of government organization. Far from persuading Democrats and Republicans to act out of a sense of duty to their state in this matter, Bailey asked state legislators to act out of self-interest and consider the immediate concern of every elected official: re-election. Endorsing Bailey's motives for a new generation of ambitious politicians, Alan Ehrenhalt contends that the success of Ribicoff's "good government" agenda illustrates that "the cause of decent government is served by the existence of some mechanism that forces legislators to do things they are not individually eager to do. In Connecticut, in the 1950's, the Democratic party chairman provided that mechanism by reminding legislators uncomfortable with reform that they might face a prospect more uncomfortable – the loss of renomination itself."<sup>56</sup> Thereby governing Connecticut legislative politics with sensitivity to majority sentiment and a mind to avoid the corrupt motives that plagued political bosses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Boss Bailey defined the ideal character of enlightened political bossism: responsible, republican, reform-minded.

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<sup>55</sup> Lieberman, 232-247.

<sup>56</sup> Ehrenhalt. 151.

“Every Good Man Looks After His Friends”:  
The Mobilization of Political Majorities in Madison’s Pluralist Republic

Recognized by Theodore White in *The Making of the President 1960* as a “mercilessly efficient” political party, the Connecticut Democratic Party achieved majority status in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century state government by focusing its resources on John Bailey’s tripartite formula for political success: “good candidates, good issues, good organization”.<sup>57</sup> Enforced by the Bailey machine’s enlightened authority in the area of nominations and legislative policy, this formula governed the political actions of a generation of Democratic governors and legislators, directing the personal ambition of lawmakers to serve the party’s greater electoral and legislative objectives. However, as important as good candidates and good issues were to the continuation of the Boss’s power in government, Bailey understood that Democrats would score few political victories without sufficient emphasis on effective party organization. In the Boss’s opinion, effective organization grew out of the recognition and mobilization of minority groups into a working political majority, a body of voting citizens who, only after being mobilized, would be able to respond to Bailey’s strong partisan leadership.

Cut along racial, ethnic, ideological, economic, geographic, and religious lines, Connecticut’s minority blocs constituted the core of Bailey’s Democratic Party, a coalitional, “big-tent” organization geared to advantage those citizens marginalized under more than a century of conservative Republican rule in “the Land of Steady Habits.”<sup>58</sup> Bailey, himself a fourth-generation American, represented two of these groups as a descendant of Irish Catholic immigrants. Though Bailey’s family had long become

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<sup>57</sup> Lieberman, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Lieberman, 17-39.

financially distant from the “great unwashed masses” that flooded into Hartford, New Haven, and other New England cities a century before, Boss Bailey nonetheless professed great pride in his heritage, associating freely with the Irish community in the urban politics of modern-day Hartford. In this light, John Bailey found himself, as his parents had, to be a Democrat by birth, a product of the Democratic Party’s efforts to mobilize the Catholic and immigrant vote from Reconstruction through the era of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Underworked as a lawyer during the early years of the Great Depression, Bailey drew in close contact with the urban attitudes of the Democratic coalition as a ward heeler for T.J. Spellacy, gaining an appreciation of the political machine’s power to aid the “man on the street” in exchange for loyalty on Election Day. Bailey, like the old guard political bosses, gained the trust of his ward by concerning himself with its problems, bringing issues like neighborhood housing and unemployment to the attention of Spellacy and other Hartford power brokers.<sup>59</sup> In this role, taking a page from George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, the Boss recognized that “every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn't isn't likely to be popular.”<sup>60</sup> However, given the Boss’ comfortable financial position, Bailey had no ambition to engage in the “honest” grafting that tarnished Plunkitt and other big-city contemporaries, aiming only to harness votes and promote himself as a leader within the party.

Proving his political worth as an adept party coordinator at the ward and citywide level over the next ten years, John Bailey gained control of the Hartford Democratic Party and ultimately the State Central Committee by adapting his organizational methods

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<sup>59</sup> Lieberman, 48-50.

<sup>60</sup> Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*.

to account for wider political spheres and magnified political divisions. A Madisonian pluralist in his practical political thought, Boss Bailey understood and drew political advantage from the factional character of the American republic, a system of government constructed to secure the healthy competition of ideas and interests between different individuals and political organizations.<sup>61</sup> Recognizing the utility of such competition to his own party organization, Bailey gained and maintained political power in Connecticut by mobilizing interest-driven, idea-driven, and identity-driven groups to get out the vote for his candidates, giving each in return a proportional stake in Democratic nominations and policy initiatives. As Lieberman indicates in *The Power Broker*, “his behavior here testifies to one of the great underpinnings of American democracy: it is not a majority but a coalition of minorities that rules.”<sup>62</sup> Similar to his pragmatism on nominations and public policy, the Boss’s decision to include both liberal and conservative groups within the Democratic coalition broadened the party’s popular appeal beyond its liberal, urban base, painting Democrats as the party of inclusion. In Bailey’s mind, there existed no ideological “enemy” to battle with, no conservative menace to defeat, only the personal and party-wide advantage that came from mobilizing more voters than did the Republicans in the next election. Protected from majority oppression by the extent and proper structure of the Madisonian republic, Connecticut’s minority groups gained special influence in government under the Boss’s Democratic Party, an organization geared to recognize and respond to their specific interests and ideas.

In the electoral realm, John Bailey strongly encouraged the nomination of minority politicians on the state party ticket, empowering Irish, Italian, and Polish

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<sup>61</sup> Hamilton et. al, 344.

<sup>62</sup> Lieberman, 345.

Catholic Democrats to vote Democratic out of loyalty to their ethnic-nationalist identities and religious affiliations. Though these groups constituted a firm majority of the state Democratic Party for almost a half-century before the Boss's ascension to the chairmanship, Bailey's predecessors under Governor Cross hesitated to hand the reigns of party organization over to more liberal, urban Democratic elements, choosing instead to fill the State Central Committee with out of touch conservative businessmen. Much to the dismay of Yankee Democrats, Bailey integrated minority leaders into the very structure of his organization by handpicking them to run for positions of stature within the state political community.<sup>63</sup> For example, in one particularly blunt use of authority at the state convention in 1962, Boss Bailey chose to elevate an unknown politician, Bernard Grabowski, to the nomination for congressman-at-large largely because of the latter's Polish Catholic heritage. Bearing witness to this act of political leverage, Lieberman recounts that "there was no active coercion involved in the massive delegate run to Grabowski's bandwagon... most other delegates simply agreed with Bailey's conclusion that there should be a Pole on the ticket."<sup>64</sup>

Aiming to maximize his party's political advantage, the Boss grounded his nomination strategy for statewide elected officers on balancing the ticket between Democratic ethnic blocs, constituencies that Bailey recognized as essential for victory on Election Day. Cultivating politicians like Abe Ribicoff, Ella Grasso, and Nancy DiNardo for long political careers, Bailey also recognized the unique political appeal of minority candidates to an increasingly liberal Connecticut electorate. Pushing Ribicoff for Governor in 1954, Bailey had "the hunch that this smooth and forthright Jew from

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<sup>63</sup> Lockard, 311-315.

<sup>64</sup> Lieberman, 284.

Hartford might be the perfect Democratic candidate in a state that still was marked by an urban-rural, Yankee-immigrant split.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, recruiting Nancy DiNardo to work for the State Central Committee in the early 1970's, Boss Bailey recognized her ability to appeal politically to Italian Democrats and to urban women voters, two voter blocs that were especially important to the party's Hartford County organization.<sup>66</sup>

However, political scientists like E.E. Schattschneider and Duane Lockard debate Bailey strongly on the point of minority group voter cohesion, asserting that professional politicians should be wary of accounting for or discounting for entire minority blocs in their electoral calculations. Addressing Bailey directly, Lockard points to the 1954 election for congressman-at-large as evidence for his claim, an election in which the Democrats decided to nominate a Yankee instead of a Polish candidate and still won the vote in Polish wards over Antoni Salak, the Republican incumbent. Having served a term as Democratic state senator in the Connecticut General Assembly, Lockard's familiarity with Boss Bailey's organizational strategy underscores the professor's larger point: minority group support is "an intrinsically small factor in the total vote... it may well be offset by other groups who are persuaded to support the man just because he is *not* what the ethnic group insisted that he be."<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, addressing the issue more broadly, party government scholar Schattschneider doubts that organized minority groups of any form have the power to exert uniform voting behavior on their adherents, given that most Americans associate themselves politically with more than one group. In his view, the Madisonian pluralist

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<sup>65</sup> Lieberman, 166.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Nancy DiNardo, 30 March 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Lockard, 317. [Original emphasis]

republic allows “interests to compete with interests for the attention and enthusiasm of every individual...the notion of resolute and unanimous minorities on the point of violence is largely an invention.”<sup>68</sup> Called to respond to both critiques, Boss Bailey would have defended ticket balancing as a means of perpetuating minority representation and ensuring Democratic victory at the polls, regardless of whether or not he was able to exercise down-the-line control over specific ethnic blocs. For Bailey and his organization, the independent-minded political views of the Connecticut electorate necessitated any and all steps to secure core Democratic constituencies, for in state electoral politics, “you’ve gotta do what you gotta do.”<sup>69</sup>

In the legislative sphere, John Bailey made plain efforts as chairman to bring minority ideological groups into the state Democratic coalition and hold their support, focusing his efforts on organizing and motivating urban industrial unions through pro-labor legislation. One of the backbones of the national Democratic Party in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II, the labor movement motivated Bailey and other Democrats in Connecticut to endorse consistently liberal positions on economic and social issues, positions that labor rewarded with fealty to Democratic candidates. Given that the Democratic power base in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century rested squarely in Connecticut’s cities and outlying suburban neighborhoods, Bailey’s decision to endorse union policy was a straightforward, politically savvy choice, and one that also ensured that campaign funds and poll workers would be easily available to the State Central Committee. Cognizant of the fact that union laborers in Hartford, New Haven, and other Connecticut cities were more likely to be ethnic minorities than Yankee Protestants, the Boss’s pro-

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<sup>68</sup> Schattschneider, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Lieberman, 345.



labor stance helped to solidify his influence over Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics, giving these groups two incentives to vote Democratic in the next election. In return for electoral support, Boss Bailey, the consummate political pragmatist, allowed labor leaders to set a great deal of the state party's convention platform, the document which set the goals and boundaries of Democrats' policy initiatives in the next legislative session. As Lieberman details, "labor was the major special interest group the Democrats had to satisfy. A place was reserved for a strong pro-labor Senator on the Senate Labor Committee, and all attempts were made to realize at least some of the legislative desires of the unions."<sup>70</sup> Rewarding these groups out of political necessity, Boss Bailey gained the trust and loyalty of labor leaders, influence the Boss used to turn power brokers in Hartford and other cities to his political will.

Seasoned in the field of minority group politics by the end of the 1950's, Boss Bailey sought to adapt his organizational methods for use on a national scale, choosing to serve as a political advisor to Senator John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign for the presidency. Applying the skills he had learned in the "small republic" of Connecticut to the scope of Madison's large republic, Bailey soon gained political connections with the larger, more complex minority interests of Democrats across the country, tapping bosses and party leaders from primary states to keep him abreast of local developments among Democratic factions. Bailey's official role, as defined by inner Kennedy circle and recorded by Theodore White in *The Making of the President 1960*, was to be "shepherd of the Northeastern bosses in the Kennedy pre-Convention planning," a job that demanded the Boss's connection with the parochial issues that concerned local party

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<sup>70</sup> Lieberman, 132.

chieftains and their political machines.<sup>71</sup> However, pushed by the ambition to assist his young candidate and ascend to the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee upon a Kennedy victory, Boss Bailey involved himself in every aspect of campaign strategy, using his contacts from past national conventions to gauge popular sentiment across the county.

Acting upon a memorandum that he had written four years prior for the first Kennedy campaign, Bailey suggested that the mobilization of Catholic voters for Kennedy along the east coast could force the hand of some of the more conservative Northeastern bosses, for, as it was in 1956, “a Catholic candidate would bring more votes to the ticket solely on the basis of his religion than he would lose.”<sup>72</sup> Using the Church – unofficially, of course – as a conduit for pro-Kennedy sentiment, Bailey aimed to prove two points to party leaders and convention delegates: first, that a Catholic could win the Democratic nomination as well as a general election, and second, that national mobilization of a specific minority group could have a significant impact on the general voting behavior of the American electorate. Attacking the voter cohesion argument of E.E. Schattschneider and Duane Lockard all the while, the Boss asserted that Catholics in America, like the Irish, Italian, and Polish voting blocs in Connecticut, would identify heavily with a candidate espousing their religious “worldview” and would thus be drawn to vote for a Catholic-led ticket.

Though he and the other members of the Kennedy planning committee understood that they could never exert complete control over Catholic voting behavior, Bailey remained confident that the candidate’s campaign could mobilize significant

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<sup>71</sup> White, 65.

<sup>72</sup> Lieberman, 197.

Catholic support by addressing the question of religion and presidential politics head-on. Beyond eliciting substantial support from Catholics in the April 1960 Wisconsin primary, the Kennedy campaign's direct response to the "Catholic" issue helped to secure a Kennedy victory in the heavily Protestant state of West Virginia, forcing Hubert Humphrey to withdraw his candidacy for the Democratic nomination.<sup>73</sup> Working as hard as he could to expand Kennedy's Catholic voting base before the Convention, Bailey succeeded in convincing the Eastern party bosses that unlike Alfred Smith in 1928, John Kennedy was an "electable" Catholic. Thereby keeping his faith in minority group voting cohesion and in the ability of his candidate to appeal to American Catholics, Boss Bailey illustrated his continued dedication to the cardinal rule of political organization: "every good man looks after his friends, and any man who doesn't isn't likely to be popular."<sup>74</sup>

Playing Both "The Lion and the Lamb":  
The Virtue of Compromise in Boss Bailey's Connecticut Democracy

Describing the courageous actions of six senators in his prize-winning study of *Profiles in Courage*, John F. Kennedy, then-Senator of Massachusetts, lavished praise on the contemporary American politician's willingness to engage in political compromise, an act that Kennedy labeled as both necessary and natural to practicing "the art of politics." Operating within the context of the U.S. Senate, an institution that labels itself "the world's most deliberative body," Kennedy believed compromise to be an essential component of the policymaking process, a trust-building exercise in which politicians go along not only to get along but also to accomplish substantive policy goals. A Wilsonian

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<sup>73</sup> White, 116-140.

<sup>74</sup> Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*.

Democrat in his political views but a Madisonian constitutionalist in his understanding of the U.S. government, the future president recognized that Madison's system, in providing for the free competition of ideas and interests, also encouraged cooperation among politicians, parties, and interest groups.<sup>75</sup> Empowering those who understood the political advantage in compromise, the Founder's Constitution, by Kennedy's understanding, allowed pragmatic politicians like Boss John Bailey to practice their trade efficiently and effectively, pushing forward the cause of active, responsible parties in government.

Playing both the "lion and the lamb" – i.e., competing and negotiating – in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Connecticut politics, John Bailey used his close relationships with Republican and Democratic politicians to engineer compromises on all forms of legislation and nominations.<sup>76</sup> Distributing patronage and allotting pork dollars in a manner intended to maximize Democratic support during the next election, Bailey aimed not only for "mere" political advantage, but also for the public recognition that his party could be counted upon to broker honestly on all issues of merit. For example, having experienced the frustration of pushing forward Governor Chester Bowles's liberal platform to a General Assembly of conservative "steady habits" in 1948, Chairman Bailey drew great satisfaction in lobbying for the compromise agenda of Abe Ribicoff in 1954, an agenda that allowed Bailey to sit down in negotiation, and not confrontation, with Republican State Chairman "Cappy" Baldwin. Baldwin, a descendant of the old-style Republican leadership of the 1930's, likewise prized the opportunity to parley with the Boss on matters of policy and politics, possessing a sincere belief that Bailey would stand by his word on all final agreements. As Baldwin observed, "He [Bailey] was easy

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<sup>75</sup> John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956, 1-20.

<sup>76</sup> Lieberman, 176.

to work with in those sessions where you would trade a traffic light in one town for a road in another, and you could really trust him.”<sup>77</sup> Sharing the sentiment, Bailey used Baldwin’s trust to develop relationships with prominent Republicans, all the while expanding his sphere of influence into Connecticut’s Yankee conservative political circles. For Bailey, working with Baldwin did little dilute the former’s partisan loyalties; instead, their cooperation enabled Bailey to gauge the sentiment of the Republican electoral base, to do a better job of “balancing and interpreting the forces and factions of public opinion” beyond his own party.<sup>78</sup> Emulating Bailey’s pragmatic style in her discussions with state Republican Party chairman George Jepson, Democratic state chairwoman Nancy DiNardo likewise believes policy compromise to be an essential political skill, a skill that DiNardo applies in her monthly meetings with Connecticut lawmakers.<sup>79</sup>

While negotiations with Cappy Baldwin showed the Boss at the top of his game, in command of his legislative caucus and prepared to bargain on issues large and small, John Bailey learned to appreciate the “art” of compromise not by winning, but by losing his earliest political battles. Ambitious, idealistic, and politically “wet behind the ears,” a young Boss Bailey endured political defeat in his first party election by failing to compromise with Hartford’s Democratic establishment, a confrontation that cost him the race for twenty-first precinct captain in the city. Failing to grasp the solidly Democratic, but pro-organization disposition of the precinct itself, Bailey’s campaign stood as an overt challenge to Hartford’s “Big Three of T.J. Spellacy, Herman Koppleman, and Tony

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<sup>77</sup> Lieberman, 183.

<sup>78</sup> Kennedy, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Nancy DiNardo, 30 March 2006.

Zazzaro," power brokers who ran city government in the Old Guard style of T.J.

Roraback<sup>80</sup>.

While certainly less hostile to ambitious Democrats than the dictatorial Roraback had been, Hartford's governing triumvirate resisted Bailey's attempt to circumvent their authority in favor of his own, deeming the young Democrat's campaign as combative, rather than conciliatory to their continued rule over city politics. Recognizing the power of the establishment and thus, the fatal flaw in his campaign, after the election, John Bailey dedicated himself to observing and emulating the winning political strategy of Hartford's power elite, a strategy grounded in cooperation among the "Big Three" on all matters of city policy. Switching sides to become an "organization" man in the process, Bailey witnessed the utility of political pragmatism and ideological compromise to the successful administration of a modern American city, conciliatory tactics that took on special importance with the rise of liberal New Guard Democrats during the Great Depression. As Spellacy's "errand boy," the Boss developed contacts with both Old and New out of necessity, using their resources and personal loyalties to engineer his own rise to power in Hartford and at the state convention in 1946.<sup>81</sup>

Fully familiar with Old and New Guard players and their political strategies by the time of his ascendancy to the state chairmanship, Boss Bailey found immediate use for the Old Guard's conciliatory methods as a means of unifying Connecticut Democrats, liberal and conservative, into a cohesive, loyal party organization. Having experienced conservative Democrats' attempts to push urban liberals out of the State Central Committee during the Great Depression, Bailey understood that Democrats in the 1940s

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<sup>80</sup> Lieberman, 47.

<sup>81</sup> Lieberman, 68-82.

could hope for neither electoral nor legislative victory without some measure of party unity, unity that the Boss desired to be centered on his own political leadership. As E.E. Schattschneider observes in *Party Government*, Bailey's task in this matter was made significantly easier by the natural "moderating effect" of the two-party system on Republicans and Democrats, for "a large party must be supported by a great variety of interests sufficiently tolerant of each other to collaborate, held together by compromise and concession, and the discovery of certain common interests."<sup>82</sup>

However, while brokering the compromises that ensured liberal and conservative Democratic factions a final say in legislative policy, Bailey as chairman refused to allow the Democrats' agenda to be hijacked by ideologues on either side, evaluating the worthiness of all policy proposals on their ability to benefit the entire party during the next election. In similar terms, while disagreeing with the "immoderate" means used by Bailey and other bosses to bring about final legislative products, Schattschneider argues that "to make extreme concessions to one interest at the expense of others is likely to be fatal to the alignment of interests that make up the constituency of a major party."<sup>83</sup> Confident in the virtue of moderation in intra-party politics, both the Boss and his party government critics would likely react negatively to the more recent trend towards ideological polarization in national politics, polarization that empowers liberal and conservative activists at the expense of marginalizing considerate centrist politicians in the Bailey mold. However, Boss Bailey would have most certainly admired the recent compromise put forward by his student, Senator Joseph Lieberman, during the U.S. Senate debate over the judicial filibuster in May 2005. Working with other senators in the

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<sup>82</sup> Schattschneider, 85.

<sup>83</sup> Schattschneider, 85.

“Gang of Fourteen” to forge consensus on an issue critical to the institutional stability of the Senate, Lieberman epitomized the even-handed attitude with which Boss Bailey conducted political negotiations in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Connecticut.

Uniting his caucus in support of moderate party proposals, John Bailey fought for his party's future by engineering compromise solutions to policy debates across party lines, demonstrating, in an era of increasing party competition, the utility of bi-partisan legislative action. Having arisen to challenge the Republicans at the polls after more than a century of political subordination to conservative politicians like J. Henry Roraback, Connecticut Democrats in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century sought the upper hand in legislative negotiations, a demand that the Republican leadership in the State House of Representatives prepared itself to challenge on every major Democratic bill put before the legislature. Empowered by the malapportionment of the Connecticut General Assembly in favor of rural representation before 1965, Republican majority leaders used their institutional advantage to coax Bailey and his Democratic governors towards more conservative legislation, a tactic that Bailey countered by enforcing party-line voting on Democratic senators in the upper chamber. Like Martin Van Buren, Bailey thrived in an environment of heightened party competition, contributing to the stability of Madison's republican system through his willingness to pit his own political ambition against leaders within and without his own party.<sup>84</sup>

Engaging in this political tug-of-war through much of the 1950's, Boss Bailey recognized the importance of persuading more liberal, suburban Republicans to break away from their party leadership, attracting many through appeals to parochial interests

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<sup>84</sup> Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 135.



and by reminding them of the difficulties of gaining re-election in an increasingly Democratic state. However, in every case, the substantive negotiations made between both parties reflected the restrictions placed upon them by their respective campaign platforms, documents that represented more than “electoral fly paper.” Considering the consequences to wayward Democrats, Lieberman suggests that “if a party did not make at least a symbolic thrust in the direction of fulfilling one of its platform promises, it could be expected to be pelted with charges of hypocrisy.”<sup>85</sup> Bailey, whom his biographer labels “one of the great pelters of modern Connecticut history,” nonetheless chose compromise as a means of softening the political blows, helping to establish an environment in which bills could be satisfactorily negotiated and passed by the General Assembly.

Elevated to the national chairmanship and left in charge of directing party politics in three different kingdoms – Washington, Connecticut, and Hartford – after 1960, Boss Bailey continued to broker compromises for Connecticut Democrats in search of political advantage and inroads on Republican constituencies, compromises he found to be increasingly unstable and unenforceable from his purview in Washington. Though still in solid possession of the governor’s office, Bailey faced challenges to his role as chief legislative negotiator from a new class of Democratic representatives, many of whom owed their election to the favorable reapportionment of the General Assembly in 1965. Having failed to establish personal relationships with many of the new class and cut off from direct contact by virtue of his national party duties, the Boss possessed little means by which to direct their voting behavior of the Democratic legislative caucus, a larger and

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<sup>85</sup> Lieberman, 225.

much different creature than the small body of state senators he led to victory in 1951. However, as political scientist Alan Ehrenhalt recounts in *The United States of Ambition*, “the problem was not Bailey’s age, or staleness in the job, or even his prolonged absences from the state during eight years as Democratic national chairman. The problem was the Vietnam War, and the climate of political restlessness that it inaugurated, and that has been a fact of life ever since.”<sup>86</sup> Abandoning his attempts at inter-party compromise, Bailey sought once again to tie together a bitterly divided Democratic Party, an undertaking which the Boss marshaled his many years of experience to perform.

Following the Democratic caucus’ large-scale uprising over the distribution of delegates to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Bailey set to the job of reconciling the state party back to his political leadership, a task made all the more difficult by Bailey’s open support of the Vietnam War as Democratic national chairman. Opposed outside the legislature by the Caucus of Connecticut Democrats, a left-leaning citizens’ lobbying group, and inside the legislature by House Majority Leader Ed Marcus, Bailey recognized the need to make concessions in his own leadership style, mindful that the legislative tactics he had employed in 1951 were no longer politically viable in 1971. As Lieberman, who himself became an anti-war state senator in 1970, relates in *The Legacy*, “Bailey recognized the change that had occurred in the self-image of the legislature and its leaders, and gave them the deference they felt they deserved. They treated him with respect and involved him as a wise and experienced counselor.”<sup>87</sup>

Empowered with the autonomy to determine their own agenda without seeking approval

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<sup>86</sup> Ehrenhalt, 153.

<sup>87</sup> Lieberman, *The Legacy: Connecticut Politics 1930-1980*. Hartford, C.T.: Spoonwood Press, 1981, 178.

from Bailey and his subordinates, the Democratic legislative caucus employed their party chairman as a conciliator between legislators in the House and Senate, factions of which had become highly confrontational in the post-Johnson Vietnam era. Striking the balance between the two chambers with his interminable desire for party unity, Bailey the “establishment reformer” returned to political prominence as an enlightened force for compromise in Connecticut government, finding the middle ground upon which a new generation of Democrats could gain and sustain political partnership.<sup>88</sup> Indeed for Bailey, as for John F. Kennedy, compromise was not only a useful expedient for political victory, but also a virtuous “art essential to keeping our nation united and enabling our Government to function.”<sup>89</sup>

#### Responsible Partisanship:

#### James Madison and the Political Legacy of John M. Bailey

What, if anything, can John Bailey’s organizational methods, electoral victories, and legislative strategies teach today’s professional politicians about political success? In the view of Connecticut’s Lieutenant Governor Kevin Sullivan, Bailey’s political legacy lives on in the governmental structures and competitive two-party system that the Boss helped to shape in his days as State Chairman, institutions that continue to affect the behavior of contemporary Connecticut politicians. Deeply influenced by his first meeting with Bailey in 1968 at the age of nineteen, Sullivan credits the Boss as a “brilliant practitioner of traditional brokered politics” and an instrumental force in bringing liberal and conservative Democrats back from the brink of political separation after the 1960’s. Bailey, in Sullivan’s eyes, succeeded in forging a bond among Democrats capable of

<sup>88</sup> Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 273.

<sup>89</sup> Kennedy, 6.

withstanding the ideological battles of the Vietnam era, a consensus centered on the necessity of party unity and discipline for political victory. Attempting to model Bailey's pragmatic centrism in political negotiations with Governor Rell in 2006, Kevin Sullivan testifies to the Boss's continuing influence over Connecticut state politics, reinforcing the permanent presence of power brokers within Madison's decentralized, pluralistic party system.<sup>90</sup>

Alerting the people of New York to the "vices" emerging from a factionalized, divisive political system in *The Federalist* #10, James Madison clearly recognized the danger in allowing factious leaders to centralize political power in few hands, a hazard that he pronounced to be the "very definition of tyranny."<sup>91</sup> However, interpreted by modern political scientists in the Wilsonian tradition as a warning against all forms of political centralization, Madison's admonition has been used by Progressive and Neo-Progressive reformers to argue against all forms of strong party leadership. Believing in a more issue than interest-driven political system and the need to decentralize party authority among party members, these reformers and their ideological adherents have transformed many of strong state party structures of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century into weak fundraising institutions that now play a minimal role in selecting candidates and forming legislative agendas. In Connecticut, this transformation has minimized the Democratic State Chair's influence in the legislative arena, making the party's platform effectively nonbinding on the policy initiatives of state legislators.<sup>92</sup> Demonizing strong party leaders like John Bailey, David Laurence of Pennsylvania, and Mayor Daley of Chicago, the

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<sup>90</sup> E-mail interview with Lt. Governor Kevin Sullivan, 03 Mar. 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Hamilton et. al, 308.

<sup>92</sup> E-mail interview with Lt. Governor Kevin Sullivan, 03 Mar. 2006.

Progressives and their descendents also have rejected the utility of political machines to party victory, aiming to eliminate or at least subordinate the “vices” of partisanship in search of elevated policy discourse between representatives and their constituents.

Similarly, attempting to balance the principles of liberty and authority in the governance of political parties, these “morning glories” have undermined the effectiveness of party mobilization efforts in once strongly partisan Connecticut constituencies, decreasing membership rolls and increasing the ranks of independent voters.

Nonetheless, by weakening state parties and state party leadership across the country for the cause of fighting factious political leaders, Wilsonian party reformers have chosen to ignore Madison’s advice on the dangers of “non-partisan” government: “an extinction of parties necessarily implies either a universal alarm for the public safety, or an absolute extinction of liberty.”<sup>93</sup> Taken from Publius’ discussion of politicians and the public in *The Federalist* #50, this citation illustrates Madison’s hesitancy to discount the salutary effects of parties on republican government, effects that, at least in the Founder’s view, counterbalance the political discord and disharmony brought on by such factions. Further advanced by the decentralization of factions within the “large republic,” Madison’s argument for the existence of parties in America centers on his own experience as a party leader during the ratification debates, a position in which Madison was forced to negotiate and broker the character of the American Constitution with Federalist allies and Anti-Federalist critics alike. Much John Bailey in his single-minded focus on the task at hand, James Madison relied on his political skills, his partisanship,

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<sup>93</sup> Hamilton et al., 329.

and “feel” for public opinion to ensure the successful ratification of the Constitution, a document forged through consensus and political compromise.

Likewise believing that “the rise of parties in a free system of politics is inevitable,” E.E. Schattschneider embraces Madison’s defense of political parties as a natural conclusion, for “as the creators of democracy, the parties ought to be able to make democracy work.”<sup>94</sup> Though Schattschneider and his colleagues in the responsible party school of thought fight against the decentralized nature of Madison’s party system in their support of strong national organizations, any theory of responsible partisanship relies at its core upon the pro-party construction of the American Constitution. Creating the framework in which ambitious politicians like John Bailey could direct politics and policy on a state and local level, James Madison, unlike early Progressive reformers, embraced a government tolerant of strong party leadership. Confident that the Constitution would restrain such leaders from overthrowing the government, Madison indicated that “the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.” Thereby holding a “republican remedy” for harmful factionalism in the large republic, Madison concluded that the country would have little to fear from party bosses like John Bailey.<sup>95</sup>

Demonstrating that modern political machines could function effectively and efficiently without harming America’s constitutional system, Boss John Bailey returned Madison’s trust by creating a responsible, republican, and reform-minded Democratic organization in Connecticut, advancing both Wilsonian democratization through his

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<sup>94</sup> Schattschneider, 9, 208.

<sup>95</sup> Hamilton et al., 61.

cultivation of underrepresented minorities and Madisonian pluralism through his support of strong inter-party competition and intra-party compromise. Practicing enlightened machine politics, John Bailey embraced the opportunity to lead his party responsibly, breaking away from the Tammany mold of party bossism to support reform proposals like party primaries. Though these proposals would serve to ultimately weaken his power in Connecticut politics and encourage legislators to buck the party authority, Bailey seized on them as an opportunity to gain popular support for the growing Democratic coalition. In addition, given his pragmatic approach to policy and his habit of always looking ahead to “the next ballgame,” Bailey’s penchant for co-opting Progressive proposals and making them his own demonstrated that the purposes of principled government and partisan politics were not mutually exclusive in Connecticut.<sup>96</sup> Understanding the practical influence of both the Wilsonian and Madisonian schools of political science, Bailey recognized that both ideas and interests were important to the preservation of his own power within republican government, neither of which he could ignore in forming legislative policy and selecting candidates for nomination. Thereby bridging the gap between the graft-oriented machines of America’s past and the increasingly accountable party organizations of America’s future, the Bailey machine embraced enlightened bossism as the means to provide responsible, republican government to Connecticut’s citizens in an efficient, highly disciplined manner.

Described by the longtime Hartford Courant political reporter Jack Zaiman as always “in the right place at the right time with the right people,” John Bailey impacted the core character of Connecticut’s government and two-party system by serving as an

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<sup>96</sup> Lieberman, *The Legacy*, iv.

effective party boss for more than thirty years, leaving behind a legacy of political victory unmatched in the history of the Connecticut Democratic Party.<sup>97</sup> Ambitious without the arrogance or greed that undermined many politicians of his generation, Boss Bailey sought, retained, and brokered power not for personal advantage, but for the cause of advancing Connecticut government through the election of Democrats to office.

Evaluating Bailey's power forty years after his death, Lieutenant Governor Kevin Sullivan champions the Boss's central role in "rebuilding the post-war Democratic Party into a powerful organization that dominated candidate selection and generally produced good candidates who became good leaders."<sup>98</sup> Along with Senators Chris Dodd, Joseph Lieberman, and Democratic state chairwoman Nancy DiNardo, Sullivan is one of a handful of contemporary state leaders whose political careers were advanced through competition or compromise with Bailey. Encountering the legacy of John Bailey through these public figures and from the enduring Madisonian structures of government and party in Connecticut, students of Madison and professional politicians may rightly discover, as I have in this thesis, five essential maxims for effective strong party action.

First, political machines are an inevitable and indispensable force in America politics and a boon to republican government and a democratic people if properly managed. Second, a strong party platform means little without effective, politically savvy candidates who can turn ideas into policy and provide stable, energetic leadership in government. Third, effective management of a party agenda for legislative action demands careful moderation of special interests and exceptional knowledge of government frameworks and power structures. Fourth, electoral success for political

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<sup>97</sup> Lieberman, *The Legacy*, xi.

<sup>98</sup> E-mail interview with Lt. Governor Kevin Sullivan, 03 Mar. 2006.



parties in republican government requires a strong commitment to recognizing and organizing minority voter constituencies. Fifth, political pragmatism and the willingness to compromise are not only virtuous, but are wholly expedient for the long-term purposes of party politics in government.

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